Title

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Abstract

Statement of the Problem

“*In my opinion it is the ownership of words that gives one confidence*” (Native Alaskan teacher Martha Demientieff as quoted by Cazden, p. 173)

Conversation surrounding story telling is the very foundation of the western literary tradition. It has the power to heighten imaginative capacities. It is the foundation of the social constructivist learning theories according to such prominent thinkers as Dewey, Freire and Vygotsky. Unfortunately, it is a dying tradition. Rampant, instantaneous communication in the form of texts or tiny social media sound bite conversation in addition to current educational legislation that stresses isolated skills and recall is taking a damaging toll on classroom conversation that requires students and teachers to engage in substantial, thought-provoking and thought-developing talk.

The study of British literature in English classrooms traditionally begins with the first epic poem, *Beowulf*, originally told by word of mouth and later recorded by an anonymous poet in an archaic form of English. Students learn that the oral story telling tradition provided socialization, hope and entertainment for the masses when the struggle for survival was great and heroes were few. The gathering in the ancient mead hall around the scop (Anglo Saxon version of a troubadour) was representative of the very first “campfire” or Salon (generally defined as a social gathering in a public space designed to make meaning from a story.)

Although our modern age may still present incredible challenges and relatively few heroes, the feasibility and desire to gather and dialogue around an aesthetic work has changed and lessened as both a social norm and as a form of instruction in the classroom. This is due in part to advances in technology and social media, but also in part to the current emphasis on standardized testing and teaching to scripted, skills based lessons. Costigan and Dickson (2011) note, “In the past 10 years, urban schools have seen changes in the autonomy teachers are given to develop stimulating curricula…accountability in the form of high-stakes testing and more standardized and homogenized methods of teaching has limited students’ authentic engagement with literature in favor of utilitarian goals…(p. 148).

Such a utilitarian educational trend has resulted in alack of engagement, passivity and/ or alienation on the part of students as well as a potential lack of rapport between teacher and student. As Gavriel Salomon (1998) wrote,

Why alienation at a time when finally social interaction—face to face or though something like the Internet—is so highly promoted, cherished and easily attained? The reason may lie in this very paradox: The Internet, as its soothsayers predict with glee, will turn yesteryears’ campfire around which we all gathered once in a while to reiterate our shared culture into a thousand, nay, a million separate and unrelated campfires with no center to hold them together…alienation is likely to follow. (p.1)

The problem is further compounded in states and districts that assess students on speaking and listening skills but do not have a program in place designed to instruct them on how to become proficient in said skills. The combination of literature that students find difficult to understand (such as those who maintain a strict canonical teaching that create difficulty in regard to students’ comprehension) in addition to their lack of speaking and listening skills, may present insurmountable challenges for a teacher expecting a conversation that will lead to increased critical literacy skills.

In a study by Laura Billings and Jill Fitzgerald entitled “Diologic Discussion and the Paideia Seminar” (2002), it was concluded that dialogue “infrequently occurs in classrooms.” (Hadjioannou (2007) citing multiple studies, Lindfors, 1999; Newkirk & Mclure, 1992; Nystrand, 1997; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996 reached the same conclusion.)The study pointed to four reasons for this fact. The first was that most talk followed the IRE (initiation, response, evaluation) sequence; secondly, most talk focused on the teacher disseminating already-known information to students; thirdly, is that in adolescent classrooms boys tended to talk and challenge more than girls contributing to a gender issue; and lastly, in general, existing research focused on the teacher functioning as expert evaluator and students as passive observes in what they termed “teacher-fronted” discussions (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 911). As such, students are receiving insufficient discussion-based instruction that could enhance their ability to develop independent critical literacy skills. Critical literacy is defined as the type of thinking that challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development (Shor, 1999). It is the very philosophy on which our country and the idea of a democratic schooling was founded. As such, critical theories on literature and discourse provide secondary English students with alternative dialogues and lenses with which to vie and talk about literature that will lead them to new understandings and constructions of reality. (Shor, Appleman, 2009).

Another related aspect of the problem is that the current emphasis on national standards has clouded the question surrounding curriculum reform in ELA. Many have mistakenly identified the standards as content that should govern a skills-based curriculum instead of the other way around. Applebee (1997) acknowledges that, “In English language arts, this tension between knowledge and process made the development of national curriculum standards difficult and contentious.” When standards, rather than ideas, govern curricula content, there is inevitable danger of schools working with curricula that are not rigorous and do not espouse critical literacy and higher order critical thinking skills. When this occurs the fallout will include resistance from students who will associate schooling with a reproduction process rather than a democratic or equalization process (Alper, 1991, p. 351). The ultimate result is secondary English classrooms filled with passive, ill-behaved and unengaged learners.

This article suggests that a review of the literature surrounding democratic authentic classroom discussions that pervaded liberal arts classrooms of the past and institutions of the present, such as that of Elizabeth Coleman, President of Bennington College in Vermont, are worth looking to once again for inspiration and information.

This article will represent a review of the literature on the topic and answer the following questions:

* Why focus on classroom discussion?
* How is classroom discussion defined?
* What conditions influence classroom discussion?
* How can teachers foster classroom discussion?
* How can classroom discussion effect student learning?

The article will conclude with a summary of the review, implications for teacher practice in the secondary English language arts classroom, a conceptual framework for implementation, and suggestions for future research.

DON’T FORGET TO USE CHARTS, GRAPHS, BULLETED LISTS LIKE SAMPLE

SUBHEADINGS TOO

Why focus on classroom discussion?

In a quantitative study employing a series of hierarchical linear models, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamson (2003) determined that students who have classroom experiences in which discussion-based approaches are utilized “in the context of high academic demands internalize the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in challenging literacy tasks on their own” (p.685). Secondary English courses have always been the focus of a school’s curriculum in terms of teaching all aspects of the functions of language. Citing Cazden (1988) and Mehan (1979) n their study, Applebee et al discuss that the I-R-E (initiation, response, evaluation) pedagogy which has dominated English classrooms in the past and may still continue to do so (p.689) is ineffective in developing the deep understandings that students need to independently perform critical literacy tasks. Twenty schools were involved in the study, both urban and suburban, middle and high school, for a total of 1,412 students (p. 697). Classes were observed who were discussing literature. Each class was observed four times and data included student and teacher questionnaires, Nystrand’s program for analyzing classroom discussions, and measures of student literacy performance (p. 698). Class observations rated items such as when students were asking questions that demonstrated comprehension, when students challenged the text, and when the teachers’ questions required analysis.

Applebee et al (p. 707) did discover that in tracked situations, students in higher tracked classrooms engaged in more discussion than students in lower tracked classrooms. Prior to this study, most discussion-based studies had looked at a specific set of techniques, while they examined the general presence and extent of discussion and related activities, “the positive results that we obtained suggest that the spontaneous scaffolding or support for developing ideas that are generated during open discussions is a powerful tool for learning” (Applebee, 2003, p. 722).

How is classroom discussion defined?

Hadjioannou (2007) defines authentic classroom discussion as a speech genre in which participants explore ideas and opinions in which the objective is “to reach new and more sophisticated understandings” (p. 371). The definition is furthered by adding that no specific conclusion is specified, participants have diverse roles, connections with experiences are made, and are characterized by an exploratory nature (p. 370).

What conditions influence classroom discussion?

Hadjioannou (2007) points out that although there is much praise for discussion-based approaches within the educational community, there are many variables that may determine whether or not authentic discussion can take place in a classroom. These factors include the physical environment, curriculum concerns, teacher and student beliefs about discussion, relationships among the students in the class, and classroom norms regarding participation (P. 371). Hadjioannou’s qualitative study, published in the American Educational Research Journal, utilized recordings from class sessions, interviews and field notes to examine how the above list of conditions influenced classroom discussion.

If the teacher has not fostered a relationship of trust within the classroom and shown an interest in nurturing the students’ ideas, it could impair the ability to conduct authentic discussion in the classroom (Hadjioannou, 2007). In an earlier study by the same researcher (2003), it was found that a common elements that lead to productive class discussion included a teacher who circulates around the room, does not stress test-taking techniques and test preparation and creates different configurations of furniture conducive to comfort and belonging (2007, pp. 376-377).

A sense of humor and playfulness (Hadjioannou) is also a factor in case studies where conversation played a significant role in the classroom.

Teachers who support the social constructivist framework of learning wand how allow students to explore their ideas are most likely to place an emphasis on classroom conversation (Hadjioannou, 2007). Those teachers who belief more strongly in direct instruction or skills-based instruction would be less likely to develop students critical literacy through authentic discussion.

How can teachers foster classroom discussion?

According to Mary Louise Pratt (1977) teachers create contact zones in which they utilize literacy practices that ask students to adopt critical postures toward both the text and their own use of language. Although Pratt wrote over thirty years ago her ideas are timeless and relevant to promoting authentic discussion in class. They include attending to all forms of rhetoric, exercises in identifying with others, defining ground rules for community, and creating a safe and comfortable environment within the classroom. Beach et al (

How can classroom discussion effect student learning?

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

What are the implications to teacher practice?

* Policy makers must consider the artistry behind the type of teaching that is required to facilitate authentic classroom discussions and consider the reality of balancing this with the high stakes testing and accountability (Hadjioannou, 2007, p. 395).
* Principals, even in a state that stresses standardized test scores as most due now, need to trust in the teachers’ professional knowledge and pedagogical skills to develop critical literacy with talk and discussion (Hadjioannou).

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